

A White Woman in a 'Black' Skin

When I finished graduate school a few years ago I traveled 15,000 miles to Kenya, where I joined other American and African young people in building a road to a small clinic outside Nairobi. This "working with my hands" I envisioned as my vehicle to get to know the people, to discover roots that I had never known, and to probe truths about a land that America had distorted for me.

But I discovered painfully that although I shared blackness with the Kenyans, we were separated by attitudes, origins and experiences. I could not in a few months "go home" again. I could not validly penetrate the depth of their pain or of their passions.

Grace Halsell is a white woman who used medication and sunbathed here at the Watergate Health Club, in Puerto Rico and in the Virgin Islands to darken her skin and find out how it would be black. She was a couple of decades older than I was when she began her months "go home" again. I have tried to enter the skin of another should have taught her the futility of it. Miss Halsell was a writer on President Johnson's staff and is a native of Texas descended from slaveholders and Civil War veterans. In early 1968 she got the



SOUL SISTER

Grace Halsell

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Reviewed by Dorothy Gilliam

Mrs. Gilliam writes for various national magazines and appears on the television program, "Panorama." She says she had wished that a woman could do what he had done in Mississippi in company with four black teenage girls. She says that black women and mothers must have that

idea of turning herself black. Her experiences as a "black woman" began in July, when she worked while as a secretary at Harlem Hospital and later to Mississippi as a \$5-a-day domestic. In her book she tells of the kind treatment she received from blacks and the insults she received from whites. Her experiences include an attempt

She calls her book *Soul Sister*. I am instantly pleased by the audacity of Miss Halsell, after a few months of a half-masquerade (she revealed her identity to several black boys during her travels), to call herself "soul sister." This is not only an affront to blacks, it is foolish. Miss Halsell spends nearly a fifth of this 200-page book on the physiology of turning herself black, of her horror when she learns that she may not be instantly white again. "(The doctor) said I might stay dark for a whole year! . . . Very black." She admittedly was influenced by John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, written ten years earlier, which was far the better book.

A young militant in Harlem to whom she revealed her plan refused to help her. "He said that not for one second would he condone such romantic notions as a desire to go poking my nose into his friends' lives 'to discover more of your unhealed wounds.' And he added, 'No, indeed, I won't open up any of my friends' closets—for your inspection!'"

Miss Halsell is an engrossing and talented writer, but she has uncovered little that has not been said before. Certainly the book is sympathetically conceived and executed. But it never emerges from the prison of the author's own generation and

hand look at how her white brothers treat black people. But how, in turn, do black people persevere? What sustains a mother when she feeds her baby at her breast knowing that he will be hated by some simply because he is black? How does a black mother deal with her children's later feelings of inferiority? Griffin once told Miss Halsell that he